

DEM-DEC Research Update Editorial: The Power of Protest

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2019-11-13T15:11:14

Latest Global Research Update Just Issued

The latest Global Research Update on the global platform Democratic Decay & Renewal (DEM-DEC), covering October 2019, is [now available here](#). In each Update I write an editorial on key themes to help users to navigate the Update, and to provide some limited commentary, especially on very recent research.

1 The Power of Protest

October was a month of protest, with large-scale protests everywhere from Chile to Hong Kong to Lebanon, as citizens push for democratic government, removal of corrupt politicians, or a more equitable economic system (or all three). Will these protests produce change? A number of items in this Update are helpful in illuminating the power of protest and the capacity of protesters to achieve their goals. A timely comparative collection edited by Richard Youngs for the Carnegie Foundation, [After Protest: Pathways Beyond Mass Mobilization](#) (24 October 2019), suggests that the aftermath of large-scale protests is vital, with protesters facing difficult choices: to evolve into new types of civic campaign, for instance, to integrate into mainstream politics, or to deal with government backlash. Looking at states as diverse as Brazil, Taiwan and Turkey, the report provides key insights, including that broad alliance-building is key, that international action can be most productive in the post-protest period, and that social media, while providing a crucial organising tool, may permit protesters to 'leapfrog' the painstaking consensus-building needed for a sustainable political movement, to the detriment of achieving their goals.

The Carnegie Foundation's report resonates with numerous items in the [Journal of Democracy](#) (October 2019), including Patrick Chamorel's analysis of how the Yellow Vest protests have re-shaped French politics, while Mai Hassan and Ahmed Kodouda recount how the popular uprising that ousted Sudan's longtime dictator, Omar al-Bashir, has resulted in a tenuous democratisation process threatened by the renewed strength of the security forces. [Yuko Sato & Michael Wahman](#) further argue in *Democratization* (October 2019) that, in authoritarian contexts, the capacity of popular mobilization to achieve democratic change depends on coordination with élites, especially a unified opposition translates popular grievances to democratic demands. In the US context, [Karen Pita Loor](#) in the *Seattle University Law Review* (September 2019) critically analyses state executives' abuse of emergency power mechanisms to suppress protest and suggests possible counter-measures. Finally, in the Forthcoming Research section (p.26) we have listed a call for papers by the *Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law* for a special issue on '[Street Protests and Human Rights](#)', which aims to highlight key human rights issues

regarding the extent to which police powers and public order measures can have severe consequences for protesters, journalists, and other members of the public.

2 Democratic Responses to the Climate Crisis: Rebellion v Deliberation

The power of protest has come into clear focus in the context of climate crisis in recent times. In a self-published book issued in August 2019, suggested for addition by a DEM-DEC user, [Roger Hallam – one of the founders of the climate change movement Extinction Rebellion](#) – argues that the only way to stop climate breakdown and social collapse is wholesale non-violent rebellion. For Hallam, there are two imperatives: to get the truth out about the climate crisis; and a campaign of civil disobedience. As an anonymous climate activist puts it in the foreword:

We need to get arrested, tens of thousands of us. More. No more protests or petitions. Instead, nonviolent civil disobedience, lots of it and on a large scale. Close down cities until the politicians take action. Or until the people do.

Others suggest a different, or perhaps complementary, approach. Certainly, it is notable that climate change is a focus of citizens' assemblies cropping up across the world, especially in Europe – from the citizens' convention on the climate in France to the climate crisis citizens' assembly convened by MPs in the UK (not to mention the stillborn proposal to hold such an assembly in Australia in 2010). In a recent article on [‘deliberation and ecological democracy’](#) (September 2019), suggested for addition by DEM-DEC user, Simon Niemeyer discusses argues that the deliberation of ‘mini-publics’ can act as a connector between different system levels, local to global, and when properly harnessed, can reshape public discourse and ‘decontaminate’ public debate of polarised strategic political arguments.

3 New Perspectives on Digital Domination

As discussed above, social media – and the internet, more broadly – have fundamentally transformed the nature of activism. In a forthcoming article in the *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* (posted on SSRN in late October), [Tamar Megiddo](#) argues that government attempts to curb activism using the same technologies that have empowered them should be framed, not merely through the lens of surveillance and privacy, but a wider conceptual framework of ‘digital domination’ that assaults and threatens both citizen freedom and, through its reliance on ‘digital militias’ and cyberespionage, the rule of law. Megiddo sets out the main ways in which this occurs: governments “(1) gather information on activists; (2) disrupt communication channels; (3) flood online conversation to drown out the opposition; (4) deploy the state’s coercive power based on information gathered, and (5) mobilize digital militias to bully activists online.” Elsewhere, [Giovanna De Gregorio](#) in a forthcoming article in the *Computer Law and Security Review*, argues that the liberal paradigm for free speech protection is no longer sufficient to protect democratic values in the digital sphere, given that “the flow of information is actively organised by business interests, driven by profit-maximisation rather than democracy, transparency or accountability.” De Gregorio suggests the establishment of new users’ rights regarding online content moderation to enhance transparency and accountability of social media platforms. In a month that saw [Mark Zuckerberg](#)

[give a widely derided address](#) on free speech to students at Georgetown Law School, hopelessly lacking in nuance, Megiddo's and De Gregorio's analyses are welcome, and perceptive, take on the ills of digital technology.

4 Far-Right Party Supporters and the Informed Voter

The effects of misinformation on voter behaviour, and the wider capacity of individuals to successfully engage in self-government have been raised time and again. In a forthcoming article in *West European Politics* ([announced on 30 October](#); text not yet available) Stijn van Kessel, Javier Sajuria and Steven M. van Hauwaert address the debate as to whether those voting for (authoritarian) populist and far-right parties are unsophisticated or uninformed protest voters. Relying on survey data from 9 democracies in Europe, they conclude that there is a correlation between misinformation and support for such parties. Even if this impact is slight, its importance is obvious: for instance, Times correspondent Hannah Lucinda Smith observes in her book [Erdo#an Rising](#) that Erdo#an tends to win elections in Turkey “by slivers”. Moreover, , as discussed in a recent symposium of the *Maryland Law Review* (August 2019 – suggested for addition by a DEM-DEC user), as we approach [the era of ‘deep fakes’](#) the impact of misinformation could be starkly amplified, requiring a ‘deep rethink’ of our traditional understandings of free speech. That is not an argument for paternalism – as Josiah Ober argues in his 2017 work [Demopolis](#): “Democracy is illusory when citizens are kept in a condition of tutelage” with choices limited to those deemed risk-free or approved by a paternalistic elite. Indeed, Silvia Suteu suggests in the [European Constitutional Law Review](#) that citizen-centric deliberative approaches take discontent with liberal democracy seriously and can be an antidote to populism.

5 The Rising Radical Right: Does Accommodation Work?

At the time of writing, the Alternativ für Deutschland party had just overtaken Angela Merkel's CDU to place second in the Thuringia state elections in Germany on 27 October. 2 days previous, Werner Krause, Denis Cohen and Tarik Abou-Chadi issued a working paper, [‘Does Accommodation Work?’](#), arguing that evidence for the received wisdom that mainstream party accommodation of radical right policy positions tends to curtail their success is inconclusive at best. If anything, they argue, such accommodation tends to lead to more voters defecting to radical right parties. Of course, as Cas Mudde offers in the *Journal of Democracy* – discussing the success of the [‘populist radical right’ in the 2019 EU elections](#) – the centre of politics has shifted rightward, which renders the line between ‘mainstream’ and ‘far-right’ rather blurry. In the *Journal of Political Philosophy*, [Camila Vergara](#) argues that an engagement with Arendt's writings on totalitarianism can aid clarity, helping to identify the differences that should distinguish populism from what she terms ‘proto# totalitarian’ forms of politics such as ethnonationalism – the latter being discussed at length in a new edited collection (October 2019) on [Populism and Ethno-Territorial Politics in Europe](#).

(For more discussion of conceptual issues, see the [Concept Index](#) on DEM-DEC).

6 International Watchdogs

This Update contains a variety of items that underscore the role of international watchdogs in affirming democratic standards and rights and holding up a mirror to undemocratic practices. A report of 9 October by the [UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#), David Kaye, chimes with Giovanna De Gregorio's call, discussed above, in highlighting the responsibilities of companies as well as states and addressing how moderation of online content by companies such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter may ensure respect for the human rights of users and the public. A report by the [International Republican Institute](#) (albeit clearly coloured by superpower rivalry) focuses on the Chinese government's "manipulation of the information space" to neuter independent media and civil society in a variety of states worldwide, noting that lessons can be learned from Australian resilience to such tactics. A preliminary report by the [Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe \(OSCE\)](#), issued just a day after Poland's 13 October elections, points to the advantage gained by the ruling PiS party through its dominance of public media. A coalition of leading human rights organisations provide a stinging rebuttal to the Hungarian government's written response to 'Article 7' procedures against it for violations of the rule of law. Finally, the European Council (EU) Library has recently issued a [reading list on the rule of law](#).

(For more information on the 'Article 7' procedures against Hungary and Poland, go to the [Article 7 EU](#) special section on DEM-DEC).

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